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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 000037

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DUBAI FOR IRPO

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/19/2028

TAGS: PREL PGOV IR TU

SUBJECT: A TURKISH PROFESSOR'S PLAN TO OBSERVE IRAN'S
MAJLES ELECTIONS

Classified By: Consul General Sharon Wiener; reason 1.5 (d)

¶1. (C/NOFORN) Summary: A professor at Isik University in Istanbul is using his ties to a well-connected Iranian think-tank and to an Iranian political party association to try to arrange for a small team of non-Iranian election experts to observe the March 14 Majles elections. He and three university colleagues visited Iran December 16-20 to participate in an election workshop held at the Iranian Expediency Council's think-tank, the Center for Strategic Research, where he broached the idea of monitoring Majles elections. The professor believes Iran's Interior Ministry may allow his group to observe. He is also encouraging discussion among Iranian experts (including at a December 27 conference he hosted in Istanbul) about the Turkish electoral model. He will travel back to Iran in late January for another election roundtable with CSR, and will try then to lock in MOI support for a foreign election observation team. Post will stay in close contact as his election observation plans progress. End Summary.

Iranian academics come to Istanbul

¶2. (C/NOFORN) Istanbul Iran watcher met on January 17 with Isik University professor Bulent Aras (please strictly protect) initially to discuss his role in hosting a December 27 conference in Istanbul with visiting Iranian academics on Iran's domestic policy and foreign policy. The Turkish daily "Today's Zaman" on December 31 published an interview with one of the Iranian participants, Dr. Rahman Gharemanpour (available at www.todayszaman.com). In that interview, Gharemanpour denied that Iran posed any threat to Israel, dismissed President Ahmadinejad's call for Israel's destruction as being only "for domestic consumption", and proposed Turkey and Iran create a regional nuclear accountancy organization. A list of the conference's discussion topics and participants can be found at: <http://iibf.isikun.edu.tr>.

¶3. (C/NOFORN) Aras characterized the eleven Iranian participants, most of whom work for the Expediency Council's think-tank, the "Center for Strategic Research" (CSR) as well-informed, well-connected members of Rafsanjani's "pragmatic camp." There were "one or two" reformers present, including Behnaz Ashtari, an attorney who formerly worked for Shirin Ebadi. Aras promised to share the Iranian presentations, including on "reform and democratization on Iran." We will forward the papers to the Department when received. Aras said there were no policy surprises from the Iranians. He described one of the highlights of the conference was a "cordial" side meeting between an Istanbul-based Israeli diplomat and several of the Iranian

participants. He also said there was significant interest on the Iranian side in learning more about the Turkish electoral model and lessons from the ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP) electoral success.

An election workshop in Iran

¶4. (C/NOFORN) Aras revealed that the more interesting Iran-related effort he is undertaking involves election-related discussions with the CSR in Iran. He and three fellow professors from Isik University traveled to Iran December 16-20 under the auspices of the Middle East Electoral Council's International Electoral Study Committee to participate in an election workshop held at CSR offices in Tehran, chaired by CSR Deputy Director and former Iranian Deputy FM Mahmoud Vaezi.

¶5. (C/NOFORN) The Turkish and Iranian participants presented five papers on electoral systems in Turkey and Iran: The Turkish professors described many of the different voting systems used in democratic countries (e.g., various types of both majority-take-all and proportional electoral systems); explained Turkey's electoral system; and reviewed the development of democracy in Turkey culminating in the July 2007 general elections. Iranian professor Mehdi Mokhtari presented a paper describing Iran's political system; Dr. Ghahramanpour summarized the laws and regulations that govern Iranian elections; and Dr. Mohamed Hossein Hafezian analyzed the current "political and institutional obstacles to holding free and fair elections in Iran." Aras said Hafezian's presentation focused on the conflicting demands of a constitutional republican system with a revolutionary Islamic system, in which ultimate authority rests with a position

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(the Supreme Leader) that stands above the constitution. Aras described the discussion afterwards as "intense and provocative."

¶6. (C/NOFORN) Aras is seeking permission from participants to publish the papers and promised to share them. Both sides agreed to convene a follow-up roundtable in Tehran in late January, to discuss specific procedural challenges to holding elections, "though in general terms, not focused explicitly on Iran." With CSR's support, Aras plans to invite several European electoral experts to that conference.

Planning for foreign observation of Majles elections

¶7. (C/NOFORN) Aras and his Turkish colleagues also visited the "Iranian House of Parties" on December 16 to explore possibilities for outside, "non-Iranian" observation of Iran's March 14 Majles elections. Aras acknowledged that the IHP -- which serves as an official umbrella organization for all legal Iranian political parties, and acts as a platform for discussions among parties on electoral issues and outreach to parties in other countries -- is "not a strong organization" in Iran's political mosaic. Nevertheless, according to Aras, IHP has permission from Iran's Interior Ministry to organize limited domestic election observation on behalf of specific candidates. Aras is hopeful that, under IHP's auspices, he may be able to arrange for a small group of "non-Iranian" election experts, and that Iran's Interior Ministry will allow this small foreign observation mission. Indeed, at least one European expert has already received a visa to go to Iran during the elections. Aras plans to use his late January meeting in Iran to work out further details with IHP on using a small group of non-Iranians experts as election observers. We will seek an update from Aras after he returns from that planned visit to Iran.

Comment

¶ 8. (C/NOFORN) Aras harbors no illusions that the relatively candid discussions he is having with CSR academics on sensitive election-related topics reflect any loosening of Iran's political system. To the contrary, Aras expects Iran's Guardian Council in February to disqualify many or most of the prominent reformist candidates, though he expects most candidates affiliated with Rafsanjani (and thus ideologically compatible with his own network of CSR contacts) will be allowed to run.

¶ 9. (C/NOFORN) Aras is also well aware that influential, entrenched forces in the Iranian political scene are firmly opposed to any foreign election observation. However, he believes his approach -- working quietly under IHP auspices to secure MOI permission for a small team of Turkish and European experts as a "sidelight" to the ongoing election workshops held between Isik University and the CSR -- has a good chance of success, especially if he can keep his efforts out of the media and untainted by any association with the U.S. or EU. End Comment.

WIENER